

"Sensitive Issues and Allegations"

No. 10

Intelligence and the Predictability  
of Major International Events

National intelligence is far more than the prediction of specific events. As intelligence has evolved in the years since World War II, it has become an integral contribution to the process by which national policy is shaped in today's complicated, interdependent, and dangerous world.

In this context, I believe that our responsibility in the area of "prediction" is best defined as the prevention of surprise. In fact, for intelligence to make its primary goal simply the prediction of specific events would in fact be a disservice to the policy officer. We would often be wrong, and almost never exactly right. For we would be claiming for intelligence a degree of precision in defining human intentions and in choosing among contingencies that is not within the power of any human individual or group that we know.

But we should be able to prevent the policy officer's being surprised by any event of major importance. If he is surprised, we have failed, either because our judgments were faulty or because we did not adequately communicate the degree of our concern. We succeeded on both counts regarding the Middle East War in 1967; we missed on both counts in the Middle East War in 1973.

What can the policy officer reasonably expect of us? He can expect that we will put him in the context of events as they occur; that we will help him understand the dynamics of a situation; that we will lay out a range of possible outcomes, especially those that damage US interests or present an opportunity to the US; that we will seek by further collection and analysis to narrow this range, to reduce many possibilities to a few, and to rank them; and that we will warn him at the earliest possible time of any increase in the odds for a serious crisis. But we must not cry wolf too often. Sooner or later one is sure to be right that way, but the policy officer will have long since ceased to listen.

The India-Pakistan War of December 1971 is a good example of what intelligence at its best can do. At no point did we forecast a specific event on a specific date, but we were able in April 1971 to forecast the nature of Indian military support for the Bengalees, and by June to warn that events were moving toward war. Policy officers were fully informed of the role of the Soviets and Chinese, of the high probability of Indian victory and East Pakistani independence, and of the international consequences that might flow from the weakness of the new state of Bangladesh.

Of course, there are occasions, unfortunately rare, when we can say correctly that event A will occur on date B, as with the Turkish invasion of Cyprus on July 20 last year. In general, however, the more we can draw a prediction from physical events or evidence, the more confident we can be. When, in early 1972, crack North Vietnamese reserve divisions physically moved to the Vietnam Demilitarized Zone, we correctly saw this as preparation for a major offensive. (Yet it still took a political decision, several weeks later than we expected it, before that offensive was launched.)

Because construction takes time we can project accurately from physical evidence Soviet ICBM strength as much as two years hence. Longer range projections are necessarily less accurate. In fact, hindsight shows that we were consistently high in the late 1950s and early 1960s--lacking hard evidence, we had to extrapolate short range trends. We were too low in the late 1960s because we could see little military need for Moscow to go for a larger force, and expected to see more emphasis on a technologically better force at that time. We did not give enough weight to Moscow's political need to match--and in some respects to exceed--US strategic forces in size as soon as possible. When we are projecting ten years or more out beyond what clear evidence will allow--as we must do to support US military planning--we are entering periods for which the Soviets themselves have not made firm plans and decisions.

Even when physical evidence is available, its meaning is usually ambivalent. Our experience is that major international events usually stem from political decisions, and these in turn from personal relationships within groups of

leaders. This human factor can affect our forecasts in many ways. Here are some examples:

- The Last-minute Decision. National leaders often take contingency preparations for action, reserving as long as possible the final decision whether to act. When the Soviet leaders took alarm at the direction Czechoslovakia was heading in the spring and summer of 1968, they sent forces toward and into Czechoslovakia to conduct "exercises." We reported throughout the summer that Moscow had assembled the forces necessary for military intervention. In late July and early August, however, a series of indecisive meetings among the Soviet leaders, and between them and the Czechs, seemed to take some of the urgency out of the threat, and it now appears that the final decision to "go" was taken only a few hours before the invasion was launched on 20 August. (We understand from later information that the Politburo vote was close.) We had warned the US Government that preparations had been made, and that at least some of the Soviet leadership were in favor of intervention. But we could not say whether they would in fact intervene--they did not know themselves.
- The Coup Plot. Successful coups are usually made by small, tight cliques of military troop commanders, operating in total secrecy. Intelligence can virtually always identify a situation that is ripening for a coup--discredited leadership, factionalism, disorder, economic disruption. It can usually identify interest groups that would profit from a coup. It can often identify likely plotters and sometimes penetrate their circle. It can sometimes distinguish the marginal plotters from the real "heavies." But it can only rarely predict with confidence precisely who will act, how and when. Nonetheless, more often than not, it has been able to give adequate warning that someone is likely to take action.

- The Fortuitous Opportunity. Plotters may plot for years and never act, perhaps because they are inveterate plotters and not doers, perhaps because everyone--and especially the local security service--knows they are plotting, or perhaps because they can never find the right opportunity. On the other hand, the desire for action may fester for years in the minds of a plotting group, unknown to anyone else, and when an opportunity comes they will seize it. In 1958 an Iraqi brigade was being transferred from one frontier to another, passing through Baghdad. Because it was on active service it carried live ammunition, which the government wisely did not permit to units permanently stationed in the capital. A group of officers, who had long sought such an opportunity, took over command, diverted the brigade, and overthrew the government. There was, obviously, no intelligence warning, although analysts had long perceived that the basic situation was unhealthy.
- The Self-defeating Prediction. One can find on the intelligence record many warnings of events that never took place because the warning stimulated policy action to forestall them. This, of course, is really intelligence doing its job, and we are not about to wring our hands because the situation of which we warned has not come to pass for this reason.

This Committee has called sharp attention to the intelligence community's performance in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. You have available a detailed study that we ourselves undertook about what went wrong with our judgments regarding the imminence of hostilities at that time. No one is going to argue that there was not a serious failure.

What is important now, however, is what we have learned and what we have done as a result of this chastening experience. Let me give a few examples in this category:

- We have improved informal substantive give-and-take among expert analysts in the intelligence community. The National Intelligence Officer

for the Middle East calls analysts together whenever the situation appears to be heating up, and explores with them facts, perceptions, and judgments.

- We have turned to more systematic techniques of expressing analysts' judgments on the probability of a given event--such as the outbreak of hostilities--occurring within a given time period. The technique we are using also displays for the policy officer the range of analysts' individual judgments on these issues.
- We have revamped our approach to estimating Middle East military developments at the national intelligence level. We are now not only identifying the strengths of the major antagonists but also trying to envisage alternative ways in which a war might develop and be played out. This has been especially helpful to contingency planners.
- Nor have we been shy about re-entering the estimative field in the Middle East. Major estimates of "next steps" in the situation were produced at critical points during the past year. Our customers have indicated that these were generally well received and regarded as useful.

In conclusion, I can assure the Committee that we in the intelligence community are not only aware of our own human limitations and of the constraints imposed upon us by the very nature of the human affairs with which we deal, but are seeking as actively and as imaginatively as we can to assure that US policy officers are not taken by surprise and that they have the fullest possible understanding of the context in which major international events take place.